

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2009

Remarks on the 20th Anniversary of the Points of Light Institute in College Station, Texas

October 16, 2009

The President. Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you. So, howdy, Aggies.

Audience members. Howdy!

The President. All right. It is an honor to be here with all of you today at this outstanding university.

Now, I was told that if the winds had been different today, President Bush would have parachuted in to kick things off here. That's the story. But that's okay. I am still thrilled to be introduced by this man whose vision of service we celebrate today and whose life of service is an inspiration to all of us.

And much to his likely embarrassment, I'm going to talk a little more about the singular nature and impact of that service in a minute. But before I do, I'd like to recognize several other people joining us today, starting with President Bush's extraordinary wife, Mrs. Barbara Bush. Where did she go, Madam First Lady? There she is over there. As we all know, Mrs. Bush has an impressive record of service herself, particularly her tremendous work to promote family literacy across this country. And so we are very, very grateful for everything that she's done on behalf of our Nation.

We have our Secretary of Defense here, Secretary Bob Gates, who I think you know a little bit about. He has served for four decades under eight Presidents with integrity, with candor, with an undying commitment to keep this Nation safe. And I know how much he loved his time as president here at A&M, which is why he was relieved to hear about this week's game is out at Kansas State. I didn't want him sneaking away to relive his glory days leading yell practice, never returning to Washington.

But I can tell you—and I want everybody to understand this—although it is an enormous sacrifice for him to have left this institution, he could not be doing a better job on our behalf, and I want you all to know that I am very proud to have him as our Secretary of Defense.

I want to acknowledge former Secretary of State Jim Baker, who's served this country for decades as a trusted adviser to Presidents, and more importantly, as a statesman. I also want to thank another Texan, Ambassador Ron Kirk, for his terrific work as our United States Trade Representative. Former Senator Sam Nunn for his lifetime of service; I want to mention particularly Senator Nunn's visionary work on nuclear nonproliferation. And we have two outstanding Members of Congress who are here with us today, Chet Edwards and Sheila Jackson-Lee. Where's Chet? Chet's over there. I want to recognize Melody Barnes, Director of the White House Domestic Policy Council, for her outstanding work on service and many other issues. Stand up, Melody.

I want to thank Michelle Nunn, the CEO of Points of Light, as well as Neil Bush, chairman of the board, for their wise leadership. I want to congratulate Mallory Myers, today's Daily Point of Light Award winner, and commend her for her tireless work to pulling together "The Big Event," which I know is no easy task.

And I understand that this event is just one of the countless ways that students at this university are giving back to this community, from tutoring children and building homes, to raising money to fight cancer and AIDS, to continuing A&M's proud tradition of military service.

So I can see why President Bush chose to locate his library at this school. What you all are doing right here is precisely what he was talking about when he called for those thousand points of light and became the first President to create a White House Office devoted solely to promoting voluntarism.

It's a vision that's changed lives across this country, including that of a young woman who went to work for an organization called Public Allies to prepare young people for public service careers, an organization initially funded by the Bush administration. And her experience there inspired her to devote her own life to serving others, and that young woman happens to be my wife, Michelle Obama. And I've been instructed to convey her gratitude today as well.

But here's the thing. George Bush isn't just a President who promoted the ethic of service long before it was fashionable, he's a citizen whose life has embodied that ethic. From his daring service as a Navy pilot during World War II—enlisting the day he turned 18—to his time in Congress, at the CIA, and as U.N. Ambassador, Vice President, and President.

He easily could have chosen a life of comfort and privilege, and instead, time and again, when offered a chance to serve, he seized it. It was second nature to him, the continuation of a proud family tradition that he and Mrs. Bush clearly passed on to their children and grandchildren, and one which he's carried on throughout his quote, unquote "retirement." How's that working out, Mrs. Bush? *[Laughter]* Spends it working tirelessly to help others, without fanfare or any expectation or desire for recognition.

Though I do recall one endeavor of his that actually drew quite a bit of attention. That was back in 2005, and some of you may remember this. He and President Clinton had agreed to come together to raise money for the nations devastated by the tsunami that killed nearly 230,000 people in Asia, and that partnership between these two Presidents would continue in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

As first, longtime friends and aides to both of them were suspicious—let's tell the truth now. *[Laughter]* They were convinced that the other guy was using their guy to burnish his own reputation. That's how staffers are. But then when one operative expressed his concern to President Clinton, the President sharply rebuked him, replying, "This is much more important than politics."

This is much more important than politics. That's the conviction that drew these two outstanding leaders, once fierce adversaries, to join forces: the belief that there's some things that are beyond politics; that there's no place for partisanship when a great American city is underwater; that the R or D next to your name is irrelevant when nations in crisis need the world's help; that certain moments call on us to stop the back and forth and the bickering, to forget the old rivalries and embrace a common purpose that is bigger than our differences.

And while you might not always know it from watching the cable news shows or listening to folks on the radio, I think it's clear that we stand at one of those moments. We're seeing turmoil in our economy that's left many people wondering whether their kids will have the same opportunities that they had to pursue their dreams. We face threats to our health, our climate, and of course, our security that have left many of our young people wondering what kind of future they'll be leaving for their own kids. And if anyone here thinks that our

government has all the solutions, President Bush and I will be the first to tell you that you'll be sorely disappointed.

Government can build the best schools, with the best teachers, but we can't run the PTA or chaperone those field trips or mentor those kids after school or have them sit down and do their homework at night. We can pass the most comprehensive health reform bill, but Congress can't be on the ground in our communities caring for the sick and helping people lead healthier lives. Government can give our troops the equipment they need and the pay and benefits that they have earned—and nobody is working harder at doing that than Secretary Gates—but it can't be there to offer a home-cooked meal to a military family stretched thin or to make sure our veterans get the respect and appreciation they deserve in their communities when they come home.

In the end, when it comes to the challenges we face, the need for action always exceeds the limits of government. While there's plenty that government can do and must do to keep our families safe and our planet clean and our markets free and fair, there's a lot that government can't and shouldn't do. And that's where active, engaged citizens come in. That's the purpose of service in this Nation.

And that's the point I want to emphasize today. That service isn't separate from our national priorities or secondary to our national priorities, it's integral to achieving our national priorities. It's how we will meet the challenges of our time.

To this day, despite all the evidence to the contrary, there's still folks with this notion out there that, well, service is nice, but it's not really essential; it's something you do once in a while to fulfill a requirement or to fulfill yourself or for a year or two after college to put off getting a real job—*[laughter]*—I'm talking to you—*[laughter]*—the notion that the real work of changing this country is done by people with fancy titles and big offices out of Washington, DC.

But history tells a very different story. It's the story of patriots who set forth the ideals that animate our democracy and all those who fought and died for those ideals. It's the story of women who reached for the ballot and people who stood up and sat in and marched for justice. It's the story of firefighters and police officers who rushed to those burning towers and ordinary people who rushed to the aid of a flooded American city.

That's always been the story of this Nation, the story of those who stepped forward in our darkest hours to serve it, those who rose to answer the defining questions of their time: Colony or country? Free or half free? Separate but equal or truly equal? Those folks weren't in it for the money. Those folks were volunteers. Their service wasn't extra. It was the work that changed this country.

The courage, the patriotism, the compassion that drove them to act are the same qualities we need today as we seek to answer the questions of our own time. Will we continue to be a land of opportunity where all things are still possible for all people or a place where those born without advantages of wealth, health, and good luck have the deck stacked against them? Will we engage with the world to confront our shared threats or hope against hope to defer them to the next administration, the next generation?

The answer to these questions lie, in large part, with all of you, the young people especially who are here today. And that's why I feel so optimistic about our future, because you all are the most engaged, service-minded generation since the 1930s and forties, serving your communities in record numbers. Last year, applications to City Year tripled, and the Peace

Corps had three applicants for every position. AmeriCorps applications were up 400 percent in just the first 4 months of this year alone.

Having come of age in serious times, you all don't have a lot of patience for pettiness and bickering and the worn divisions of the past. Rather than arguing about whether, or how, we should do something, you'd rather just go out there and get it done.

As President, it's my mission to put that passion and commitment to work, to build on the efforts of President Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush, and others to engage not just young people, but people of all ages and walks of life to serve their communities.

That's why I was proud to sign the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act, expanding AmeriCorps and Senior Corps, other programs that give people the chance to give back. That's why we've created a new community innovation fund to seek out the most creative, effective nonprofit organizations in America, ones that could be the next Harlem Children's Zone or Teach for America, and replicate their efforts all across this country.

That's why this summer we launched United We Serve, a nationwide effort calling on all Americans to make service part of their daily lives. And we partnered with more than 400 organizations, made more than 250,000 service opportunities available on serve.gov, and watched as nonprofits and foundations and corporations and individuals spent hundreds of thousands of hours serving their communities.

So we've been doing everything we can to get people involved. And I'm pleased to have with us today my nominee to lead the charge on those efforts as CEO of the Corporation of National and Community Service, Patrick Corvington. Patrick, stand up and wave so we can all recognize you.

But I also want to be honest with you: While we'll do our best to make it easy to get involved, the service itself won't always be easy. People won't always appreciate what you're trying to do for them. You won't always make the difference you had hoped for. And let's be honest, some problems are so big, so stubborn, that even your best efforts will only help just a little bit. They might just help one person. They might just help one corner of a neighborhood. But those are the efforts that matter the most. It's through that struggle, the fact that it's hard, that the difference is made, not just for others, but for yourself. That's how you young people in particular will discover your strengths and weaknesses and the depths of your compassion and courage. It's how you will grow and how you grow closer to the people you serve.

And once you've formed those connections, you'll find that it's a little harder to numb yourself to other people's suffering. It's a little harder to convince yourself that their struggles aren't your problem. It's a little harder to just stand by as a bystander. Once you've tutored young people in a struggling neighborhood, it's hard not to care about that ballot measure to fund their school. Once you've volunteered at a food bank, it's hard not to care about poverty and unemployment. Over time, the needs of the people you serve become your stake in the challenges of our time.

See, in the end, service binds us to each other and to our communities and our country in a way that nothing else can. That's how we become more fully American. That's what it means to be American. It's always been the case in this country, that notion that we invest ourselves, our time, our energy, our vision, our purpose into the very fabric of this Nation. That's the essence of our liberty, that we give back, freely.

You don't have to devote your entire career to service, though I hope that many of the students here will. But I'm asking you to have a public service mindset. I'm asking that no matter where you live or what job you do or what obstacles you face, you're always looking for ways to make service part of your life.

Whether through it's—it's through your workplace, your house of worship, or your local school, whether it's in your own neighborhood or another where the need is greater, whether you offer some special skill or just an extra set of hands and a sympathetic ear.

I know you're busy. I know that sometimes, even if you don't like to admit it, service can feel a bit like a chore. But if Mallory Myers can repeat last year's success and get more than 12,000 students to perform more than 20—a hundred—let me try that again—1,200—it's so much that it boggles the mind, Mallory—[*laughter*]¹—12,000 students and 1,200 service activities in this community—if Mallory can do that, then surely you can round up a few friends to volunteer in your community too.

Audience member. That's right. [*Laughter*]

The President. That's right. I got an amen back here. [*Laughter*]

If President Bush could fly 58 combat missions when he was younger than many of you here today and keep on fighting even after he was shot down and nearly captured by the enemy, then surely you can keep going when your service project gets a little tough. [*Laughter*] Don't you think?

If 11-year-old Erin Buenger, whose all-too-short life touched so many in this community, could travel to Washington and lobby Members of Congress for cancer funding while going through chemotherapy, if she could raise money by making lanyards and writing her own cookbook, all while making the honor role, then surely you can find the strength to serve even when you face challenges in your own life.

And that, ultimately, is the idea at the heart of President Bush's vision, that each of us has a role to play and all of us have something to contribute. He didn't call for one blinding light shining from Washington. [*Laughter*] Right? He didn't just call for a few bright lights from the biggest nonprofits; but he called for "a vast galaxy of people and institutions working together to solve problems in their own backyard."

And today, 20 years later, think for a minute about the impact that he's had. Think of the thousands of people and organizations who've been named Points of Light and the countless others he inspired to do their part. Think of all the people they touched and the lives they changed and all of those who were helped who went on to help others. That's the extraordinary ripple effect that one life, lived humbly, with love for one's country and in service to one's fellow citizens, can have. May we each strive to make that kind of difference with our own lives.

Thank you, President Bush. Thank you, Texas A&M. God bless you. God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:39 p.m. at Texas A&M University.

Categories: Addresses and Remarks : Points of Light Institute in College Station, TX, 20th anniversary.

Locations: College Station, TX.

Names: Baker, James A., III; Barnes, Melody C. ; Bush, Barbara; Bush, George H.W.; Bush, George W.; Bush, Neil; Clinton, William J.; Corvington, Patrick A.; Edwards, Thomas C. "Chet"; Gates, Robert M.; Jackson-Lee, Sheila; Kirk, Ron; Myers, Mallory; Nunn, Michelle; Nunn, Samuel A.; Obama, Michelle.

Subjects: AmeriCorps; Armed Forces, U.S. : Funding; Arms and munitions : Nuclear weapons and development :: Nonproliferation efforts; Community Service, Corporation for National and; Defense, Department of : Secretary; Economy, national : Recession, effects; Education : School improvement and renovation; Education : Teachers; Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act; Health and medical care : Cost control reforms; Peace Corps, U.S.; Points of Light Institute; Senior Corps; Texas: President's visit; Trade Representative, Office of the U.S. : U.S. Trade Representative; United We Serve initiative; Voluntarism; White House Office : Domestic Policy Council, White House.

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